Do you have a disposition toward analytic examination?
Do you desire a continuous refinement of the teaching/learning process?

Then you no doubt will be interested in action research. This article describes how action research can improve students’ social skills.

Studying Social Skills: An Action Research Project

In the process of improving the social skills of students with autism, we conducted this action research study with seven youngsters during a 45-minute daily recess period (see box, “What Is Action Research?”). Here we see the role of the teacher as researcher and the actions taken to improve students’ functioning in this area.

Step 1: Framing the Question

For children with autism, a strong curricular component is social skill development. Children with this disability often have difficulties in relating to others; therefore, social skills are integral to the entire educational program (Christof & Kane, 1991). The challenges of appropriate social interactions for these children can result in social withdrawal, atypical behavior, or one-sided conversation (Marks et al., 1999).

Developmentally, students who are 5- to 7-years-old are typically establishing and terminating friendships based on sharing time and things (Mussen, Conger, Kagan, & Huston, 1984). Yet, observation of these seven students during recess indicated an absence of social exchange. Over the course of 3 days, each child functioned in isolation during the entire recess period. Students walked in circles around the playground, climbed on equipment, shot basketballs into a hoop, or played on the swings.

The question was obvious. How could we facilitate social interactions among peers in the natural context of recess?

Step 2: Collecting Data

A myriad of resources served to inform our decision making and action planning.

Observations and Interviews. First, observations and recommendations by staff and parents provided many helpful insights related to the students’ individual functioning and potential actions. Observations were conducted by the school psychologist, the speech therapist, the students’ parents, and classroom teachers; and these people also provided guidance for instruction.

Specifically, an interview with the school psychologist underscored the effectiveness of direct instructional approaches, matching these students’ preference for repetition, routine, and practice. In addition, the psychologist recommended extended social opportunities for interaction with chronological age peers from general education classes; and the psychologist also recommended that teachers use prompting (e.g., “What are the other children doing?”) to maximize the students’ observational learning and peer modeling.

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What Is Action Research?

By definition, action research is founded on a commitment to improve the quality of life of others through critical reflection and inquiry (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001; Mills, 2000). The process naturally occurs as teachers gather information about and reflect on their students’ needs, abilities, and learning styles to enhance instructional outcomes.

Observation of the speech therapist’s weekly classroom lessons evidenced a focus on how to make friends. Students were asked to identify abstract characteristics of friends (i.e., “being a good sport”) and to name a friendly classmate. Responses were accurate; nevertheless, students struggled to specify a friend in the neighborhood.

Concomitantly, the classroom teacher encouraged friendly behavior during “Morning Meeting.” The teacher required the students to greet each other with a handshake, salutation, and sharing (e.g., describing a special event or significant object). Eye contact was prompted throughout the sessions. Yet, despite these in-class lessons, the students did not apply these skills (“generalize” them) to the natural environments of recess or home. Instead, observations disclosed consistent student aloofness during recess.

Parents substantiated concerns about the lack of friendships with neighborhood peers in a questionnaire developed by the teacher.

Literature Review. A review of recent literature clarified and amplified several of these findings and offered additional direction. Corroborating the advice of the school psychologist, various writers indicated the propensity for individuals with autism to benefit from direct instruction and social integration.

- Coyne, Nyberg, and Vandenburg (2000) reported that students with autism are unlikely to understand or learn the skills necessary for participation in an activity without formal instruction.
- Attwood (2000) emphasized the value of ensuring opportunities for children with autism to observe and interact with children without disabilities at their school.
- In a study by Koegel and Koegel (1995), almost 75% of the behavior of children with autism was asocial in segregated classrooms, whereas children with autism engaged in more cooperative play when interacting with peers without disabilities.

Clearly, interaction between children with autism and their same-age peers from the general education population is essential in developing and fostering social interactions.

Social interactions can be readily promoted through team and partner games. Such games are an effective means of advancing positive communication, cooperation, and socialization skills (Attwood, 1998). Nevertheless, teachers must pay particular attention to the pressures of possible stress and anxiety that may be experienced by children who typically reject group participation.

For students who do acquire particular social skills in discrete environments, the acid test of success is whether or not the learning will generalize to settings where there are no artificial prompts (Schoen, 1989). For greater prosocial behavior, students with autism must demonstrate newly acquired skills in other contexts. In this regard, parent/teacher communication can maximize application of new skills at home and school.

The school psychologist emphasized the effectiveness of direct instructional approaches, matching these students’ preference for repetition, routine, and practice.

It helps to require students to greet each other with a handshake, salutation, and sharing.

The data were conclusive. These seven students needed to improve their social skills. As a result of recommendations from staff and parents, as well as of a review of the literature, teachers began to use direct instruction on group play during recess (for examples of some group games, see Figure 1). This instruction became a vehicle for fostering communication, cooperation, and socialization with same-age peers without disabilities in a natural, integrated setting.

Step 3: Taking Action

We targeted three goals:

- All students will participate in recess every day.
- All students will learn a new playground game each week.
- All students will invite same-age peers without disabilities to play.

Group games included Caboose and Alphabet Dodgeball, Red Rover, Mother May I? What Time Is It, Mr. Fox? Red Light/Green Light, Baby in the Air, and Steal the Bacon. The rules of each game were directly taught, modeled, practiced, and played. The teachers held ongoing discussions of fair play and good sportsmanship.

Further, a chart was posted in the classroom with a matrix of student names and playground games. We awarded students stickers each day for playing the games. Participation from other children in first and second grade was invited. The instructional aide assisted the teacher-researcher and provided reliability of data collection. Finally, we informed parents of the new gaming skills and provided them with rules for home use.

The actions were explicit. We incorporated findings from data collection efforts into the intervention. Figure 2 shows the results over a period of 39 days.
Step 4: Reflecting on the Action

Apparent Gains in Social Skills. Figure 2 represents the extent to which students met the first goal, involving individual student participation in group games. The level of interactive playing during recess under baseline conditions was zero (each of the seven children played in isolation). This increased to a range of five to seven students engaged in gaming over the course of 31 days, with an average of 6.3 students participating each day. The second goal was met with all students learning the new games, while the third goal was only partially attained.

Anecdotally, the students were enthusiastic about learning and playing new games each week. They anxiously anticipated new-game instruction every Monday. In addition, the students appeared to be using fair play and good sportsmanship. But only a few students took the initiative to ask same-age peers to participate; most of such activity was a result of teacher involvement. Reliability of data was at 100% agreement. Two letters regarding this social skills program and the game rules were distributed to parents.

Observations and Questions. On reflection, the actions taken to date produced substantial gains in interpersonal social skills. However, many questions arise regarding the effectiveness of techniques that were used, and many new notions emerged related to further actions. For example, were students able to transfer the newly acquired gaming and socializing skills across settings? Did parents observe or encourage skill use in the neighborhood? The positive
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short-term results that we obtained must be viewed within the context of the school environment.

The more modest accomplishments in student-initiated solicitation of same-age peers warrants further consideration. Would the youngsters in the study have benefited from a more structured buddy system, in which requests would be focused at a specific rather than random individual? Did the children require more role-playing opportunities in approaching a peer, maintaining eye contact, and formulating the request?

Planning for the Future. For the future, we plan to offer more occasions for choice. Because students developed a repertoire of games, we could allow for individual student preference, as well as choices based on group consensus.

Reflections provided the basis for fine tuning of the learning/teaching process. Our future modifications should enhance and extend students’ social skill development.

Final Thoughts

In action research, teacher-researchers must be tenacious and willing to look critically at current practice. Throughout the process of framing questions, collecting data, taking action, and reflecting on actions, teachers embrace learning as a continuous process for professionals and parents, as well as students.

References


Sharon F. Schoen (CEC Chapter #905), Co-Director, Elementary/Special Education Programs; and Megan Bullard, Student Teacher, La Salle University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Address correspondence to Sharon F. Schoen, Co-Director, Elementary/Special Education Programs, La Salle University, 1900 Olney Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19141 (e-mail: ward@lasalle.edu).

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